

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 002603

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/06/2010

TAGS: PHUM KCRM PGOV BG

SUBJECT: MEETING WITH RAB A/DG: "DUE PROCESS IS OUR OBJECTIVE."

REF: DHAKA 2490

Classified By: P/E Counselor D.C. McCullough, reasons 1.4 b,d.

1. (C) Summary. A senior RAB officer described cross-fire killings to us as a necessary, short-term expedient. He appeared unaware of the Leahy amendment and its potential impact on army officers like himself. Like all RAB personnel, he exhibits an unmistakable swagger born from confidence that RAB enjoys strong popular and BDG support. End Summary.

2. (SBU) On June 5, P/E Counselor and RLA called on Col. Chowdhury Fazlur Bari, Additional Director General of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), to present a box of books on legal matters (including the 2004 Country Human Rights Reports) as requested to PA by RAB's librarian.

3. (C) During the one-hour meeting in his well-equipped office in RAB's shiny HQ near Dhaka airport, Bari made the following points:

-- Serving the Poor: RAB was set up to protect poor people from corrupt police and violent crime. Therefore, even though serving in RAB is not professionally enhancing for an army officer like him, he is greatly honored, he said several times, to serve the nation and help the poor.

-- Low Tech, Ad Hoc: Asked how RAB identifies its targets, Bari cited tip-offs from citizens and "other sources." As an example, he produced a recent e-mail sent to a RAB account at Yahoo denouncing someone as a violent criminal with links to an armed leftist group. Such tips are investigated and, he acknowledged, sometimes turn out to be poison pens. However, RAB takes no action against the poison pen authors since it doesn't want to discourage any sources from stepping forward. While RAB is reasonably well equipped in transport and weapons, Bari described their operations as "low tech" and dependent on the investigative expertise of police. Asked how a corrupt police investigator could be kept honest when seconded to RAB, Bari indicated enhanced esprit d'corps and more diligent oversight.

-- Expansion: RAB's strength is expected to rise from 5,521 men to more than 7,000 next year. RAB personnel come from the military (40%), police (40%), Bangladesh Rifles (10%), and others (10%).

-- Proudest Accomplishment: RAB's success in going after illicit arms sellers and weapons use was evident in recent clashes at Dhaka University between rival student groups affiliated with the AL and BNP. In contrast to prior clashes, this time there were no weapons in sight, he said. Asked why this success in arresting arms sellers had not led to arrests of the sources of these weapons, Bari replied that the latter are "white collars." He declined to elaborate.

-- Greatest Challenge: Maintaining high morale and spirit at RAB to immunize it from the problems that plague the police. Exemplary punishment of RAB personnel caught violating the law (e.g. extortion) is in the works and would be an effective deterrent.

-- Politicization: RAB would not execute any order targeting a political person for political reasons. "Ethos would stop me from accepting a political assassination." (Comment: Interestingly, Bari interpreted a question about potential RAB politicization in the upcoming election as a reference to political killings.)

-- Indian Insurgents: The Indian "insurgents" BDR and RAB clashed with last weekend (reftel) belonged to groups like ULFA. They have no base in Bangladesh, but do periodically cross the border in search of respite from Indian forces.

CROSS-FIRES

-----

4. (C) P/E counselor recounted USG concerns about extra-judicial killings and the implications for Bangladesh, RAB, and army officers who serve in RAB of the Leahy amendment. He noted the numbers -- more than 100 in one year -- and the template explanation for these midnight deaths suggested a serious, systemic problem. Bari replied that it was only natural that RAB returned fire in self-defense when

fired on, but he had no explanation for the unchanging pattern of cross-fire incidents. He quickly segued into arguing that RAB's actions against "well-known criminals" are popular because they have brought relief to a desperate population. "We are a poor, third world nation of 140 million people," he said. "What is 100-200 persons in that situation?" He described RAB as an immediate response to a severe problem, adding, "Our objective is due process."

15. (C) Noting that RAB was loosely founded on a FBI model, Bari expressed an interest in FBI training. When P/E counselor replied that such a partnership was unlikely given the cross-fire controversy, Bari asked, "Who then should we get training from?"

COMMENT

-----

6 (C) Like all RAB personnel, from the street operators to senior officers, Bari has an unmistakable swagger. RAB knows it is popular, has strong BDG support, and, in the upcoming BDG budget, its own line item. As befits a Bangladesh Army officer who is a veteran of two UN peacekeeping operations, Bari is also articulate, confident, controlled, and hospitable. He addressed a wide range of issues with varying degrees of frankness. Like his political superiors in the BDG, he makes virtually no effort to deny that extra-judicial killings occur as a matter of policy, instead defending them at length as a necessary, short-term expedient. He appeared unaware of the Leahy amendment and its implication for military officers who serve in RAB.

THOMAS